

Enhancing the Platoon Leader Experience



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IT IS WINTER at Fort Leavenworth, and the three strands of barbed wire that separate Kansas from the North Pole are doing little to slow down the Polar Express on its journey south. The children, in a rare display of excellent timing and good form, have gone to bed early and have yet to squawk. A fire burns in the fireplace of these fine Old Army quarters. On the parson's table beside my chair sits a glass of old Jameson's Irish whiskey and a glass of clear spring water. And, with a drink and a fire and a cold Kansas night come memories:

Of a lieutenant fresh from basic and airborne courses feeling prepared to be a lieutenant but not sure if he is prepared to be a platoon leader in this new unit in this strange, new place.

Of learning that it takes time to "get good" at a job, then time to "be good" and to know what "being good" feels like, and how much fun it can be when you and the platoon are "good."

Of overhearing a conversation as a junior staff captain: "Welcome to the Cav lieutenant. We ride hard and fast here, so stow your gear, draw your TA-50 (Table of Allowance), take your Advanced Physical Fitness Test (APFT), and get ready because we go to the field next week. Oh, by the way, here is our Lieutenant Certification Program. Make sure you get it done in the next 90 days."

Of recognizing that the Lieutenant Certification Program taught lieutenants good things if only they had the time to learn them.

Of a story told by General Bruce C. Clarke: "When a new regimental recruit was ready to be taken before the sergeant major, he was well turned out and formally presented. The sergeant major sat very militarily behind his desk, and the recruit stood at rigid attention. The sergeant major covered briefly the long, glorious history of the regiment. He then

The use of masculine pronouns in this article includes both males and females.—Editor

Since today's lieutenants have less platoon-leader time than in the past, the problem can be refined to "What can the Army do for a lieutenant before he receives his platoon that would maximize his development while he is a platoon leader?" The answer is that the Army should make lieutenants good at the technical aspects (many of which can be done without a platoon) of being trained platoon leaders

covered several things that all men in that regiment did and several things they did not do."¹

Of a conversation with a young second lieutenant whom I had taught as a cadet: "Sir, things are OK here at Fort Bragg. I've been here three months and don't expect to get my platoon for another two months. I'm the assistant S4 and not really happy about it. I don't do very much other than make copies and run errands."

Of my thoughts that, in the Army, we have ceased to make a "big deal" out of things that should be a big deal. Since we seldom wear Class A uniforms, we seldom put on unit awards, and we are lucky if anyone in the battalion knows what they mean. Organization days (if we have them) have become merely family and unit sports days with little, if any, mention of the history and traditions of the organization. Officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) assume, execute, and depart from difficult positions, and because it happens all the time to us collectively, we forget that it is a big deal to us individually.

Of Army promotion policies that have moved the pin-on date to first lieutenant to 18 months and captain to 42 months so that much less time is available for young officers to figure out how to be good lieutenants.

Of the question I believe all NCOs must ask, "Is this new platoon leader any good?"

Of conversations with officers recently departed from S3 and executive officer (XO) positions: "We try to ensure each lieutenant 8 to 12 months of platoon-leader time; they typically will only

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get one platoon."

"Getting Good"

With a drink and a fire and memories always comes a conversation with Conscience, who asks, "So what is the problem, Major, and what would you do about it if you were King for the Day?"

"Well, Conscience, the problem is this: given that today's lieutenants have limited platoon-leader time, how do organizational leaders set up lieutenants for success so they can quickly move through the "getting good" phase to maximize their time at "being good" platoon leaders?

To answer that question, we must first define what the lieutenant must "be good" at. Army leadership doctrine says that a lieutenant must "be" an officer of character and must "know" technical, tactical, conceptual, and interpersonal skills.

The technical aspect of the lieutenant's job includes, but is not limited to, weapons proficiency; vehicle operation, maintenance, and employment; and skillful handling of platoon paperwork. Tactical proficiencies address the employment of the platoon in its assigned mission, while conceptual and interpersonal skills relate to problem solving and interacting with other people.

Once the lieutenant can "be" and "know," Army doctrine states the actions he must "do": influencing, operating, and improving.² While precommissioning and officer basic courses teach some of these skills, the Army has always expected

lieutenants to learn, to increase their knowledge, and to improve in all of these areas during the time they serve as platoon leaders. However, since today's lieutenants have less platoon-leader time than in the past, the problem can be refined to "What can the Army do for a lieutenant before he receives his platoon that would maximize his development while he is a platoon leader?"

The answer is that the Army should make lieutenants good at the technical aspects (many of which can be done without a platoon) of being trained platoon leaders before they receive a platoon. They would begin at a higher level of proficiency and could quickly begin working on the tactical, conceptual, interpersonal, influencing, operating, and improving aspects of platoon leading. They will spend less of their valuable platoon-leader time "getting good" and more of it "being good."

Conscience again: "OK, Major. Now how will you accomplish it?"

My answer? "We should run a School of the Platoon Leader."

The School for the Platoon Leader

Our precommissioning and officer basic courses are supposed to train lieutenants as platoon leaders, and to a certain extent, they do it well. However, they prepare the generic lieutenant for service in the generic platoon.

My proposal is about preparing a specific lieutenant for service in a specific platoon with a specific set of weapons, equipment, and vehicles. This is not a new or original idea. Clarke, while speaking of his time as a combat command commander in the 4th Armored Division during World War II, said, "Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams, a recent chief of staff, was one of my tank-battalion commanders. He filled vacancies in the tank platoon leaders by what he called their 'Basic Course,' which he taught himself [emphasis added]."³

I am sure Abrams' instruction followed no formal curriculum and that the course varied from week to week, but he produced outstanding leaders for his tank platoons from the NCOs he brought up from the ranks. Granted, that was a wartime situation, but the same concept, applied today, could achieve similar results. For example, when a new lieutenant arrives at a unit, he would be projected to fill a specific platoon and would be assigned to the School of the Platoon Leader.

Successfully completing the school would earn the lieutenant a platoon. In the school, the headmaster

Crew members swab the barrel of an M109 howitzer during a training exercise in Kuwait. Lieutenants should master such tasks while awaiting their platoon assignments.

US Army

The battalion XO, assisted by the company XO, would provide the lieutenant with an introductory course in logistics. First and foremost, the lieutenant would receive a set of coveralls and be to a mechanic with the task of performing a complete service on a typical vehicle in his projected platoon. . . . The lieutenant would turn wrenches, break track, change fluids, and probably get greasier than he has ever been in his entire life.

would be the battalion commander, ably assisted by the battalion XO and S3. The lieutenant's future company commander and company XO would be the principal assistant instructors.

What would the lieutenant learn? Instruction would be tailored to the individual lieutenant and would depend on what technical skills the lieutenant would need to succeed in his projected platoon. A general course curriculum might begin with the battalion command sergeant major as the keeper of the battalion's colors. He would teach the lieutenant the lineage and honors of the battalion, the standards that all soldiers are to uphold, and the things that are done and not done in the battalion. The lieutenant would learn the battalion's traditions, Medal of Honor winners, and the important dates in the battalion's history. He would learn what those little pieces of cloth over his right breast pocket and those shiny pieces of metal on his epaulet mean. And, he would learn the ideals to which the battalion aspires

and what it means to be a part of the unit.

The battalion XO, assisted by the company XO, would provide the lieutenant with an introductory course in logistics. First and foremost, the lieutenant would receive a set of coveralls and be to a mechanic with the task of performing a complete service on a typical vehicle in his projected platoon. Like the assigned operator, this would be his only task for this time. The lieutenant would turn wrenches, break track, change fluids, and probably get greasier than he has ever been in his entire life.⁴

Through the XO's tutelage, the lieutenant would have the opportunity to obtain an operator's learning permit or license as appropriate and complete the unit's maintenance certification program. He would collect and review technical manuals, supply catalogs, and hand receipts that he would need to inventory and sign for his platoon so he can personally identify all of the components and not have to rely on others' opinions or interpretations. In this logistics

primer, the lieutenant would learn from the XO to be knowledgeable, skilled, and comfortable in the motor pool and the supply room.

The battalion S3 would help the lieutenant obtain certifications, including external certifications such as Officer in Charge/Range Safety Officer (OIC/RSO) with range control, and internal certifications, such as demolitions, nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC), or special equipment operations. Through members of his staff, the S3 would introduce the lieutenant to procedures and facilities for ranges, training areas, ammunition, simulations, and training

As we get older, we forget what a big deal it was to get that first platoon, but if we talk with those young officers, we will again understand what a big deal it is to them. So let us make it a big deal. When the lieutenant proves his mettle, he should not simply be sent to his platoon. He should be presented to the platoon with the pomp, circumstance, and ceremony he deserves.

support services.

From the S3 the lieutenant would also learn more of the basic technical skills required of a platoon leader. From the battalion and company commanders the lieutenant would learn the meat and potatoes of soldiering—shooting, moving, and communicating. The lieutenant would be responsible for his own learning. The company commander would provide support, assistance, and expertise.

What does the lieutenant do? He learns to disassemble, assemble, operate and employ, every weapons system in the company.⁵ He learns to operate all of the communications systems in the company. He learns how to use all of the peculiar items-specific models in the unit that he might never have seen before—night vision devices, mine detectors, new equipment recently fielded, or equipment so old it is no longer taught at the Officer Basic Course (OBC).

The lieutenant will practice planning a platoon operation using the soldiers, equipment, terrain, and circumstances peculiar to his unit. When he has learned all this, he will demonstrate his abilities for the battalion commander who will conduct the final exams—physical training, weapons skills, communications skills, and tactical decisionmaking exercises.

Making it a Big Deal

As we get older, we forget what a big deal it was to get that first platoon, but if we talk with those young officers, we will again understand what a big deal it is to them. So let us make it a big deal.

When the lieutenant proves his mettle, he should not simply be sent to his platoon. He should be presented to the platoon with the pomp, circumstance, and ceremony he deserves. The command sergeant major should introduce the lieutenant and welcome him to the battalion by presenting him with his unit crests and unit awards that, because he knows their meanings, are truly symbols of his unit rather than just pieces of cloth and tin.

The battalion commander, having tried the lieutenant and found him worthy, should say so and present him with his leader's green tabs, which are items he has earned, not simply purchased. The company commander should present the lieutenant with an item symbolic of being a platoon leader in his specific unit; for example, if it is an engineer unit, he should receive Field Manual (FM) 5-34, *Engineer Field Data*; a cavalryman might receive spurs; an infantryman might be given FM 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*.⁶ During the ceremony, the company commander should make a big deal about the lieutenant joining the unit, demonstrating his basic skills, and assuming platoon-leader responsibilities.

Through training and evaluation, the lieutenant will have increased in knowledge and skill and be more confident as he assumes his duties as a platoon leader. Platoon NCOs and soldiers should have immediate confidence in the new platoon leader because they have observed the process and know the lieutenant has the stamp of approval. In sum, the lieutenant, as well prepared as the Army can make him, would be ready to move quickly through the "getting good" stage to maximize his time at "being good."

Assessing the Program

Conscience again: "OK, Major, assess your program. What benefits does it bring, and what are the drawbacks?"

"All right, Conscience, but it is getting late, and the Jameson's is almost gone."

Advantages. The School of the Platoon Leader would prepare the lieutenant by giving him the time and opportunity to raise his technical skills from the elementary level taught in precommissioning and basic courses to a higher level based on the specific equipment and conditions of his assigned platoon. Other approaches to lieutenant and platoon-leader development might offer similar results, but be-



Soldiers prepare to enter an NBC chamber. Certification* as an NBC range officer is one of several qualifications newly assigned lieutenants must receive.

The battalion S3 would help the lieutenant obtain certifications, including external certifications such as Officer in Charge/Range Safety Officer (OIC/RSO) with range control, and internal certifications, such as demolitions, NBC, or special equipment operations. Through members of his staff, the S3 would introduce the lieutenant to procedures and facilities for ranges, training areas, ammunition, simulations, and training support services.

cause they often lack dedicated training, time, opportunity, and leadership, the improvements are not available to the lieutenant before he begins his tenure as a platoon leader. Through this program, the lieutenant would begin his platoon-leader time with significantly increased skill and confidence in his abilities to employ the weapons and equipment in his platoon, supervise maintenance, and lead his platoon in the field.

From day one in the battalion, the new lieutenant would be able to interact with and be trained and mentored by senior battalion leaders. The program would demonstrate that junior officer development is one of the primary functions of battalion leaders.

The lieutenant would learn some technical skills before he received his platoon so that he could concentrate on the tactical, conceptual, interpersonal, influencing, operating, and improving skills that can only be learned with a platoon. The members of the lieutenant's platoon would have an additional measure of confidence in his abilities from the be-

ginning. They would know battalion leaders had put the new platoon leader through his paces.

When a new lieutenant arrived at a unit, he would not feel he was wasting his lieutenancy as a deputy assistant staff officer. He would recognize that what he does will directly affect his ability to be a better platoon leader. This can only help his morale. By polishing his technical skills before becoming a platoon leader, the lieutenant prepares himself to move quickly through the "get good" phase and arrive sooner at the "be good" phase so he can spend more time enjoying being a platoon leader.

Disadvantages. The program would require leaders with the right skills, dedication, and personality; a significant investment of leader time; and money. Finger drilling a School of the Platoon Leader would be worse than having no school at all. Unless battalion and company leaders are willing to invest the time to teach, train, and evaluate future platoon leaders, the program will not work.

As proposed, the program assumes there are second lieutenants somewhere in the battalion waiting for platoons. Even if there were vacant platoons when a new lieutenant arrives, following these recommend-

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ations would mean that the lieutenant would have to complete schooling first. This is not necessarily bad. The purpose of the school would be to further prepare the lieutenant to be a platoon leader, not simply take up time. The vacant platoon-leader position might serve as a motivator for the lieutenant to complete the course of instruction quickly.

What happens if the lieutenant finishes school, but there are no vacant platoons? In this case, the lieutenant would probably be destined for a staff job until a platoon opened. However, I expect that a bit of staff time after completing the course would, on the whole, be less detrimental to the lieutenant's overall morale.

Some lieutenants might not graduate. I have known only two lieutenants who never should have been commissioned and who never should have had platoons. They were a danger to themselves and their soldiers. This program would allow battalion commanders to ensure that all lieutenants have the basic qualifications to serve as platoon leaders and weed out the small percentage who do not. While this could be viewed as a disadvantage to the individual lieutenant, it would be an advantage to the battalion and the Army.

All lieutenants arrive with different experience levels. Some might complete the school in two weeks; others might take three months. This variance could make managing the platoon leader slate slightly more difficult, but it should be manageable once the program is in place.

How do we account for the School of the Platoon Leader on a lieutenant's Officer Evaluation Report (OER)? In most units, the school would take about three to eight weeks depending on the particular lieutenant and his platoon. If, after completing school, he rolls right into a platoon, the time could be unrated or addressed in his rating as a platoon leader. If he spends more than 90 days in the school and a staff position awaiting his platoon, all of his time and performance would be accounted for in the OER for his staff position.

Most of the conditions in the Army have changed since current majors and lieutenant colonels were platoon leaders, but how we assign, train, and develop platoon leaders does not seem to have kept up with changing conditions. Some units might already be using programs similar to the school I propose. Others might still be doing business the same way as they did 30 years ago. For still others, this type of program might not work at all.

What Do Lieutenants Deserve?

Regardless of the exact conditions, the problem remains the same: the Army is expecting lieutenants to learn more stuff with less platoon-leader time. Field-grade officers and organization leaders owe these lieutenants some school, program, method, training, or mentoring that will allow them to maximize their learning, growth, and development while serving minimal time as platoon leaders. While it is not the only element in a program of lieutenant development, the School of the Platoon Leader could provide an excellent opportunity to develop lieutenants' technical skills, increase their confidence in their own abilities, and ensure they spend most of their platoon-leading time "being good." **MR**

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of the Army (DA), U.S. Army Engineer School (USAES), *Reflections: General Bruce C. Clarke's Thoughts on Creating Outstanding Soldiers and Units* (Fort Belvoir, VA: USAES, date unknown), 33.

2. DA Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office (GPO), August 1999), 2-1 through 2-25.

3. *Reflections*, 31.

4. Although a platoon leader should be and will be involved in platoon services anyway, he will be much more involved and be a much better supervisor if he has had the experience of performing the service himself from wash rack

to test drive.

5. These are skills often learned in basic or other courses. Yet, how many times have we gone to school and learned the M16A1 only to arrive at the unit to find it is using the M16A2, or vice versa? The objective is to provide lieutenants with the opportunity to learn specific models of weapons and accessories present in the unit.

6. DA FM 5-34, *Engineer Field Data* (Washington, DC: GPO, 30 August 1999); DA FM 7-8, *Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad* (Washington, DC: GPO, 22 April 1992, Change 1, 1 March 2001).

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